

## P A L M S

Palms are perhaps the most characteristically tropical of all tropical trees. They are found in Brazil in great abundance and variety. Often the newcomer is first greeted by the sight of the coconut palms that line Brazil's coast for more than a thousand miles. My first trip to Brazil was made on a freighter, which called at several ports before we finally disembarked in Recife. The last of these was Cabedelo, where we spent two perfect days bathing and walking along the beach under the coconut palms, and eating as much raw coconut as our stomachs would stand for. The last night on board, as I was packing up our baggage to go ashore in the morning, I found that we had one coconut left; and seeing no need to throw it away, I dumped it into a paper carton in which we put the baby's playthings, and any other odds and ends that would fit in nowhere else. I shall never forget the look on the customs inspector's face when he saw it. I understood no Portuguese then, but I needed none to understand the mingled scorn and amazement with which he exclaimed "Um côco!" He seemed to be thinking, What will these crazy foreigners do next? Bringing coconuts to Brazil!

Côco is coconut, and the coconut palm is called a coqueiro. Final "O" unaccented in Portuguese is pronounced more like a "U"; "O" with the circumflex is pronounced with the long sound, as in English "hole". The beginner in Portuguese needs to be careful here to avoid a ludicrous blunder sometimes made by confusing this word with the word cocô (pronounced very much like English "cocoa"), or asking for chocolate under the latter name, for cocô is the common word used by children to designate human excrement.

The coqueiro and the royal palm are two of the best known varieties of palm. The royal palm bears no fruit, and is planted exclusively for ornament. It is somewhat similar, in a general way, to the coqueiro, but even a novice can distinguish them by the fact that whereas the latter sways constantly in the breeze, the royal palm, even in a good, stiff wind does not sway perceptibly. The royal palm also grows taller, though the coqueiro gets to be quite tall; and whereas the royal palm is,

almost without exception, perfectly straight and erect, the coqueiro is generally inclined, and frequently crooked. There is a notable example, near Maceió, a coqueiro whose trunk, at a height of thirty or forty feet, turns sharply downward and then upward again, making two hairpin bends.

After a swim in the surf it is pleasant to stop at the little stands where green coconuts are sold, and drink the refreshing juice of one or more. They used to be very cheap, but in 1948 were selling for two cruzeiros (about ten cents) each. The man who sells it to you will open it for you, and it is interesting to see him do it. Holding the coconut, still in its outer covering, in his left hand, with a heavy knife he makes a chopping stroke, taking off a large chip of the outer covering. Turning the nut, he strikes again, and so on, until with five or six strokes he has bared the tip end of the nut itself, as one exposes the graphite in trimming a pencil. Then with a deft stroke he clips off this tip, leaving a neat round hole, through which a straw is inserted for drinking the juice. Newcomers are often disappointed with the juice, ( I can not see why some writers insist on referring to it as milk, to which it has not the slightest resemblance ) which is slightly sweet, slightly salty, and has very little of coconut taste to it; but those who take it oftener usually come to be quite fond of it. After you have drunk the juice, the man will split the nut open for you if desired, in the same operation clipping off a piece of shell which may be used as a spoon for scraping out the pulp, which, according to the stage of development of the nut, may be none at all, soft and creamy, or tough and leathery. At its best, the pulp is quite good.

Ripe coconuts will in due course of time fall to earth; but if green ones are desired, they must be taken off. In almost every community there are one or two lads, throwbacks to their simian ancestors, I suppose, who can climb the trees by seizing the trunk with their hands, and placing their bare feet against the trunk, go right up on all fours like a monkey, and about as rapidly. The fact that the trunk of the coqueiro is nearly always somewhat inclined makes this easier, but still it is by no means easy to do. Less agile persons may climb with the aid of a rope loop to serve as climbing belt. Pity it is to see picturesque customs die out, but there is now



an improved variety of coqueiro which not only produces a better nut, but has the additional advantage of not growing tall. It begins to bear almost on the ground, and never grows so tall but that the nuts may be taken off with the aid of a ladder.

It is often stated that coconut palms will not grow out of sight of salt water, but this is not strictly true, as they are occasionally found in valleys, even far in the interior. I remember once arriving at the home of a fazendeiro far in the sertão, near noon of a scorching day in February, 1942, having walked with my companions about ten miles from the point where the road had become impassable for our car. What was our delight to see near the house hundreds of coqueiros growing about the springs that come out near the base of the mountain in that happy valley! The fazendeiro sent quickly to call the black boy who was accustomed to take off coconuts for him, and soon had them before us in abundance. The juice of the green coconut is always cool, even on the hottest day; and I believe that nothing this side of the heavenly nectar will ever be so superbly good and satisfying as that drink.

Coconuts are much used in Brazilian cooking. In almost any recipe that calls for milk, coconut milk may be substituted, often improving the result. This coconut milk is not the water from the inside of the coconut, but is made in the following manner: First, the coconut is grated, after being neatly broken in half. The shell is not removed, as it facilitates holding the nut for grating. The grating is done with a little instrument made in any country blacksmith shop, having a semicircular row of sharp teeth, about  $1/8$  of an inch in height. This is usually fastened to a board, and while the board is held securely in position the nut is passed rapidly over the teeth, allowing the grated portion to fall into a bowl. A Brazilian cook can grate a whole coconut in a very few minutes. The grated mass is then placed in a clean cloth, and boiling water is poured over it -- about one pint for one coconut -- and the cloth squeezed to remove the last of the liquid. This liquid then is something like milk in appearance and consistency, and with the addition of sugar may be frozen into a delicious sherbet, or used in other ways. The pulp is discarded after extracting the milk. It is then perfectly tasteless, like so much sawdust.

Coconut is used in many other ways in cooking. It is very often used in preparing

fish. And of course there are many kinds of cakes and candies made with coconut.

There is even a folk song that I have heard the servants sing:

Sou noiva, vou me casar,  
 Meu noivo ganhando pouco;  
 Vou arrumar minha casa  
 Com meus docinhos de côco.

It might be translated:

I am going to be married soon,  
 But my lover's earnings are small;  
 By selling coconut candy  
 I'll purchase my furniture all.

In the interior there is a dwarf variety of coconut palm, which has adapted itself to harder conditions of life. People have told me of seeing the roots of this palm reaching down to prodigious depths, as revealed by a landslide, or soil erosion. It is called ouricuri, though there are three or four variant spellings. The nuts are borne in a great cluster of two or three hundred, and they are about the size of filberts, but the flavor is still substantially the same/<sup>as that</sup> of the large coconuts, and they may be used in the same manner. These nuts are often cracked at home, and the kernels taken out whole, and strung on a thread, to resemble a necklace, and in this form are brought to the market for sale. These strings used to be sold for a tostão (about one half cent) each, and besides their use as food I have heard of their being used as rosaries. Thus if one became desperate in church he could always eat his rosary as a last resort.

One of the most important palms commercially is the carnaúba, which produces a wax used in making floor wax, shoe polish, and various other things. The carnaúba grows in the sertão. It is found in Pernambuco, but Paraíba and Ceará are where it is found in greatest abundance. Its leaves are palmate, the shape of the palm leaf fan. The wax is borne on the leaves, and is obtained by cutting off the leaves, cutting them into small pieces, and boiling them. In this process, the wax comes to the surface, and is skimmed off. In that hot, dry country, the wax serves as the protection against the sun's rays; therefore, the hotter and drier the season, the more wax is produced. Most palms are worthless as timber, the trunk being soft and spongy. The carnaúba is an exception; its trunk is of hard, resistant wood, and is much used for



rough construction work.

Recife is a city of palms. Look out over the city from any high point, and you will see that palms dominate the landscape. Yonder a row of six or seven towering royal palms stand out against the skyline, in the foreground small ornamental varieties throng the door yards and gardens, and all over the city, and around it the innumerable coqueiros are seen on every hand. One comes to love the palms. The singing of the trade winds through the fronds of the coqueiros is not mournful, as we generally think the sound of the wind in the pines to be; in fact, it sounds quite cheerful, unless one is suffering from homesickness at the time. And the beauty of the palm dominated scene, so strange at first to northern eyes, grows to be a natural and accepted thing, to which we look forward after absence with keen anticipation. If a stranger can come thus to think of them, what must they mean to one born in that country, and brought up always in sight of the palms!